

28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in ordinary time

THE GRATEFUL ONE

You don't have to seek God. Just thank God.

Today we listen to the well known story of the cure of ten lepers, and the return of just one of them to thank Jesus for healing him. Jesus said: **'where are the other nine?'**

I have heard a story of a parish priest who preached on this text. He said: "neither scripture nor tradition tells us what happened to the other nine: but it is my firm conviction that their descendants live in this parish". Perhaps the parish priest should have been more grateful to those in the parish who weren't descended from them!

In whatever community we live in, family, workplace, civil or religious, how grateful are we to those around us? How often do we say so?

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Good question, but I would like first to look at an even better one. **How grateful are we to God?**

**What is gratefulness TO GOD?** It is not so much a concept as a practice: the practice of living gratefully. It means living our lives mindfully – in mindfulness that we live not just from God, or for God, but in God. Moment by moment God flows into us from the Depth of God. Do we keep that in mind? Are we surprised ("I thought I was just me")? When we get over the surprise, do we realize that all we can do is 'give' all that we are back to God in thanksgiving. 'Give' doesn't add anything to what God has already, but it does add one new thing: the fact that we recognize it, accept it, and are grateful for it. It is the only activity appropriate for those immersed in the life of this Giver.

We need to focus on the Lavishness of God to us. If you only knew the gift of God, said Jesus to the Samaritan woman. It is all too much, all too excessive. Gratitude is not an act, it is an attitude, a permanent one. Forget the moral virtues (including social justice), even forget faith hope and charity (the theological ones), the basic 'virtue' is gratitude. Without that, the others don't hold up. With it, they fall into place naturally. [There is a 'grace before meals' that some people still say, that asks God to bless the meal out of God's goodness...the Latin original, this time more truly, spoke of God's largesse...]

We don't realize enough, how unique our God is. God created each of us in an act of free love for each one of us. God didn't have to do that to be God. God would have fulfilled all the criteria of 'Godness' if God had chosen not to create me. But God did choose freely to love me into relationship with a God who actually loves me (and no one else) like that. To exist is to be in love with that God who loves this me. Me, not some other possible human. This God, not an abstract one. God cannot create me twice (a second act of creation would create someone else). So I really am unique. I'm entitled to feel unique. I am not just one more specimen of an abstract humanity. I am – incomparable! And my God is also very unique. It was totally gratuitous on God's part. So I need to be grateful to God, as grateful as God has been generous and gratuitous to me.

I remember hearing a confession, of someone who had been years, decades away from the church. Before I asked the person to say an act of contrition, I asked, do you feel sorry for all the sins in your life? The person said, I suppose so, but you know, right now, I feel too grateful to God to feel sorry at all!

We really don't have to go looking for God. God has claimed us first! Thank God!

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If we live in this gratitude to God, does it spill over into **our attitude to others around us**? We are given to one another: by the love of our parents and families, by the whole evolution of the universe, and of our own histories. Are we grateful to those around us?

'Feeling' grateful isn't quite enough. We need to do it. There are three qualities of the 'doing' of gratitude to one another.

First it needs to be **non-competitive**. I would say, it needs to be far-from competitive. We can't compete with God. Why do we compete with one another? If it's all gift, and all we need do is reciprocate, why do we turn the exchange of gifts into a game, where we want to win by outdoing the one who gifts us? Gratitude doesn't live long with competition. Let's stop competing – especially with God!

Secondly, it needs to be **without conditions**, it needs to be universal. The model of the market economy doesn't give much of a place to gratitude. But life isn't a market economy. It's a relationship of unconditional giving. It's a relationship of universal giving. Strangely, that would make us like God – even an image and likeness of God.

Thirdly, it needs to be **creative**. There is a story of a child giving her father a present of her own finger print..."there's no other one like it in all the world. I wanted to give you something unique. I am giving ALL me to you". Let's for once do something gratuitous... We live in a world in which there is almost nothing that is gratuitous. It is incapable of gratuity. Everything comes in numbers that are calculated and measured. We live by bank accounts, statistics, barometers... How long is it since you did something utterly gratuitous for someone – right out of the blue? Who would you like to begin with? When?

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I once met, by chance, an elderly black lady, her name was Gloria, whom I met at an airport in Michigan. I asked her what she did. She said: 'Well, I try to build community'. 'How do you do that?' She told me she lived in Pimlico (a very poor area of Baltimore). She came there, and found a neighbourhood of broken down tenement buildings, where people lived afraid of one another, in real isolation from one another. She closed her own doors, as they did, and just became one of them. One day she noticed a small plot of land that no one seemed to own, and to take any interest in. She dug it up, and planted a garden. In the spring, flowers came up, and the people stopped, and looked at them. They started to talk to one another about them. When the flowers were in full bloom, she cut them all, and went to every door of every tenement building, and gave each person a flower. (One old lady told her no one had ever given her a flower before).

I said, 'What a beautiful story'. She said, 'It isn't finished'. She told me that next year, the people noticed there was another plot of ground that no one wanted. They dug it up. They planted their garden. In the spring, their flowers came up. When they were in full bloom, they cut them all, and they all came, together, with their flowers, to her door, and gave her their own flowers.

Again I said, 'What a beautiful story'. She said, 'It isn't finished yet'. She told me that she and the neighbours (they were neighbours now) agreed to keep on growing their flowers, and giving them to one another, each year.

I asked, 'Is it finished now?' She said, 'Not quite. You see, it doesn't finish'. She said, 'We kept our promises, we are still growing our flowers'.

**Grandparents** : we tend to take grandparents for granted: we ought to give them gratitude.

They are, historically, a recent invention. In the middle ages, and well beyond them, few people lived beyond their late thirties. It was a rare thing for three generations to be alive at the same time: usually your parents had died before your children were born. [People were not interested in exactly how old they were: most did not actually know what day was their birthday (or what month, or even exactly what year). Not much was written down: most of the information about one's past was handed down orally, in good stories (that may or may not have been exact). Usually a person was a worker on the farm from about the age of seven or eight years. People were looked at in terms of social usefulness (work capacity) rather than age.]

All this changed gradually, but the momentum of the change increased after the industrial revolution and into the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Machines changed work, and with an exodus from the farms to the cities, social life changed as well. People began to live longer. It was more usual for three generations to be alive at the same time. 'Grandparents' began to be present in the family home. A new poverty emerged, and many struggled to find work, and with no work there was no food. Parents went to work. They had no time to be with their young children, or to tell them stories of their culture and heritage.

Grandparents took over. They were seen as useless, not in the workforce. They were thought of as 'old' when they were about 60. Most couldn't handle machines. They were left with domestic and child-care duties at home. In better off families, grandparents took on a certain respect and prestige – grandfather was looked on as a patriarch, and 'grandmother' became a second mother who was at home, while mother had a social life as well as a working one. Many children got their love and affection mainly from grandmother.

In our times, things have changed again. Many if not most people now live well into their eighties. Great grandparents are around. But they are often left out, 'retired', perhaps put in an 'old people's' home or a nursing home for full time care. They have limited capacities: can't use computers, for example.

They don't get many visits from family: perhaps they say to themselves, where are my children, where are my grandchildren?

How many grandchildren do they have? Did you say nine? Nine – where are the nine?

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